

ON ART WORKERS' LABOR CONDITIONS (MOSCOW)¹

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1. The structure of the project

1.1. Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this project is to investigate the working conditions of art workers in Moscow. In Russia, this aspect of contemporary art has largely been ignored, as debates in the field usually focused on either aesthetic considerations or market analysis. This began to change only in 2009-2010, thanks to the efforts of several groups (the so-called “Voronezh group” – Maria Chehonadskih, Arseny Zhilyaev, Elizabeta Bobryashova, Mikhail Lylov, the platform Chto Delat?/ What is to be done?, Vpered the “Forward” Socialist Movement and others). These groups were among the first who began to seriously discuss problems related to artistic labor. They organized the First and Second May Congress for Art Workers together with other activists and artistic groups in Moscow in 2010 and 2011. During these public events, participants argued at length over problems related to precarious employment in the art world. In line with these initiatives, the project “On Art Workers’ Labor Conditions,” implemented with the support of the website Polit.Ru, was launched in 2009.

Such information has rarely been publicized in the media and was never consolidated in a single resource.² At the same time, art workers’ problems and urgencies are still intensely discussed in private. The first systematic attempt to bring these voices together was initiated by the May Congress in 2010 in Moscow (in the section “Personal testimonies of art workers”).

1.2. Methodology

The methodology of the project was based on qualitative sociological research, namely gathering “oral histories.” This strategy had the advantage of selecting case studies instead of using a general model; illustrating labor conditions with biographical details; and varying the questions instead of just repeating those included in a rigid questionnaire. Furthermore, the collected testimonies could be published.

The criteria for selecting the interviewees were the following:

- 1) the place of residence at the time of the interview was Moscow (the urban space, which those living and working in the city had in common)

- 2) interviewees were under 35 years old (the standard age-limit denoting a “young art worker” – in this project, the age limit was not intended to define the “view and lifestyle of a generation”)
- 3) having a professional interest in contemporary art (as stated by the interviewees themselves or those who classify their artistic activities within the framework of contemporary art)³
- 4) participation in the programs of various institutions related to contemporary art

Additionally, the interviewees’ places of employment had to be different (one interviewee per institution), in order to gather as much information as possible from diverse institutions.⁴

1.4. The necessity of public exposure and its limits

The project “On Art Workers’ Labor Conditions” was based on the idea that working conditions in post-Soviet Russia do not only need to be normalized/regulated, but also be exposed publicly, i.e., normalization through exposure. It was also considered necessary to define, collect and publish various cases of non-payment or delay of fees/wages, to document the lack of formal contracts or agreements, long working hours, etc. Based on this evidence, further research can be conducted and art workers’ labor conditions may be improved.

However, the necessity to expose these facts also meant that some information had to be withheld for publication such as: names of institutions, organizations, and individuals, along with payment amounts.⁵ Time and again, the interviewees and the author of this research had problems with questions “about money”: in some cases these were seen as unethical, despite the participants’ willingness to openly discuss their working conditions. As a result we could not present all relevant evidences about art workers’ conditions.

2. The labor conditions of art workers

2.1. Working and living in Moscow

Art workers admitted that it was easier to find a job in fields related to contemporary art in Moscow, especially when compared to other cities in Russia, where there are few and far between institutions for contemporary art (Chehonadskih), or as opposed to Europe, where there are too many (Yaichnikova, Kravtsova, Mahacheva).⁶

After completing specialized courses in Europe, art workers usually returned to Russia (Moscow), as they found the competition here much lower; they were more likely to make a name for themselves as artists (Makhacheva) and apply their knowledge as critics and curators (Yaichnikova, Kravtsova). Also, it was easier to find a second job in Moscow in order to have enough time and money to participate in the contemporary art scene (Mustafin, Zhilyaev). In other cities in Russia, having a second job while at the same time being involved in contemporary

art is simply not possible, and therefore it seems as though moving to Moscow is a necessity (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev).

At the same time, the interviewees thought that professional development opportunities are blocked in Moscow, as opposed to cosmopolitan cities, which foster them. On an imaginary map of contemporary art, they positioned Moscow as a periphery or a very local place, where there are constant shortages of almost everything: education, public and private institutions, artists, critics, collectors, funds, employment and housing. Thus, Moscow is also a city that art workers want to leave (at least temporarily) for places with better conditions for contemporary art (Chehonadskih, Kravtsova, Dyakonov, Svetlyakov, Mahacheva, Parshikov, Zhilyaev, Auerbach, Yaichnikova).

It is a challenge for art workers based in Moscow to find a place to live. It becomes necessary for them to rent an apartment: both for those who moved here from other Russian cities (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev, Mustafin, Maslyaev, Oleynikov), as well as those who grew up in Moscow (Tavasiev, Dyakonov, Parshikov, Kravtsova, Yaichnikova, Zaitseva, Auerbach, Svetlyakov, Mahacheva). For the latter, the necessity of finding an apartment is related to the need to live separately from their parents and have an independent income. Living together with one's parents is considered inappropriate for the art workers' age or simply viewed as something temporary (Auerbach, Yaichnikova).

Housing costs are associated with the constant threat of evictions and random increases in rent, depending on the whims of landlords. These are the most significant expenditures for art workers, which take away more than half of their income. If an art worker loses his/her housing, then he/she has to spend more time and money to find a new place to move into (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev, Maslyaev). In these cases, art workers move from one acquaintance to another because they do not have enough money to rent their own apartment (Zhilyaev, Chehonadskih).

2.2. The Artistic Profession: From Education to Work

Art workers described their interest in contemporary art as a break from previous educational or professional training. Most of them were educated in the humanities, social sciences or life sciences, did not work in a specialty field, or worked only for a short time after graduation (Parshikov, Zaitseva, Zhilyaev, Mahacheva, Maslyaev). In some cases the "transition" to contemporary art meant not only a rejection of one's prior professional experience or education, but also moving to another city/country and being separated from family and friends (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev, Oleynikov, Mustafin, Yaichnikova).

Choosing contemporary art as one's main field of specialization means opposing classic and conventional models. A common grievance in the interviews was related to the conservative model of art history, still predominant in Russian universities.

Art workers, who defended their final thesis in contemporary art (the second half of the 20th century to the present), encountered resistance from the academic community (Parshikov, Yaichnikova). Moreover, art workers do not regard the introduction of contemporary art courses in leading Russian Universities (Moscow State University, Russian State University for Humanities, Higher School of Economics) and new educational art institutions in Moscow (The Institute of Contemporary Art, Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia) as a suitable equivalent for "higher education." They call into question the official status of these educational institutions, the professionalism of the instructors, the offerings of the curriculum, the level of critical thinking, as well as the connections of local institutions with foreign establishments for contemporary art and the art market in general.

2.3. Contemporary Art Institutions

Most art workers interviewed here began their careers in the second part of the 1990s or early 2000s in Moscow, when social practices within contemporary art had been already legitimated. Initially, commercial galleries, non-profits, professional publications, new state museums and contemporary art centers and departments, as well as commercial "creative clusters," emerged as democratic spaces that had the potential of establishing new and more open relationships between art and society, in contrast to official cultural institutions.⁷ One of the turning points in this joint cultural production could have been to fairly compensate each and every one who is engaged in it, while maintaining horizontal instead of hierarchical relationships, and demanding emancipatory production conditions integral to critical contemporary art praxis in general.

However, as evinced by this project, most of the aforementioned institutions, which gained status and credibility by the 2000s, have established a system of labor practices that can hardly be called democratic. They rarely organize non-commercial or critical projects, or do so very sporadically, and seldom advertise open competitions for grants, fellowships, and residencies. Moreover, these institutions almost never carry out educational or research projects, and poorly regulate contractual relationships with art workers, catering mostly to the commercial interests of various sponsors (Chehonadskih, Maslyaeve, Zhilyaev, Zaitseva, Kravtsova, Dyakonov, Parshikov, Yaichnikova, Auerbach, Svetlyakov). In addition, most private, for-profit contemporary art institutions (galleries, professional publications) function as small to medium-size businesses; therefore, they have an unstable income and are constantly challenged by rising costs and small profits (Wolf, Chehonadskih, Dyakonov). In turn, state institutions are allotted modest, but dependable on national or regional budgets; nevertheless, they also have to seek out additional sponsors and are faced with difficulties because of excessive bureaucracy (Yaichnikova, Maslyaeve, Svetlyakov). Non-commercial, private foundations centered on establishing private collections have better means of production compared to galleries and state institutions (Parshikov, Zaitseva).

As for “creative clusters,” they are first and foremost focused on leasing real estate; according to this logic, contemporary art projects should be conducive to the commercial success of the owners (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev).

The main problems art workers face - when dealing with institutions for contemporary art in Russia - are irregular employment and low salaries/honorariums for their work. Moreover, there are usually no contracts in place that would ensure the rights and obligations of the parties involved, the terms of remuneration or social benefits. When these institutions do offer a contract, art workers typically do not have any bargaining power to assert their rights; may not be experienced enough to change the conditions of the contract; or simply do not have time for it (all the interviewees).

Artists, who work with galleries and/or participate in other institutions' projects, are perhaps in an even more difficult situation: Their labor (work) is not budgeted as part of the project and is therefore not compensated (Oleynikov), while the infrequent sales generally do not cover costs of production or living expenses (Makhacheva); moreover, given the lack of sales, art works frequently end up in the recycling bin (Zhilyaev, Auerbach).

Because of all these factors, stable, formal interrelationships between art workers and institutions were never established in Moscow. For example, galleries may or may not sign contracts with artists to sell their works (Tavasiev, Auerbach). Or they can pay production fees, organize an exhibition and buy some of the works, but do not sell any art works (Zhilyaev). Or they provide studio space but seize the art works to cover their expenses (Oleynikov). Or they can offer participation in an exhibition but cannot pay production costs (Oleynikov). Few artists can support themselves by selling their works or winning grants or prizes (Tavasiev, Auerbach).

At the same time, there are attempts to foster art workers' autonomy from contemporary art institutions. However, this autonomy is based on resources (free time, finances, management) provided by other institutions, which are not dedicated to contemporary art. In other words, to realize their artistic projects, art workers must find different jobs, as teachers or designers for example (Zhilyaev, Mustafin), or receive financial assistance from their relatives (Oleynikov, Chehonadskih).

2.4. Art and labor

When describing their activities in interviews, art workers drew clear distinction between artistic practices and labor (work). If it were not for this distinction, they would not be able to act as self-entrepreneurs that is to create their own subjectivity, which is based on blurring of this distinction. Defending the autonomy of art, they do not consider themselves as “workers” per se; that is, those who are subject to external constraints of employer/client relationships and are in control

of their own work power, bear the risks of irregular, unstable employment, and are responsible for their own professional development, as well as health and pension benefits. Art workers either refuse to consider art as just work (Tavasiev) or demand recognition of their artistic practices as a form of work (Zhilyaev, Oleynikov, Mahacheva). Curators also separate different types of artistic activity, such as creating concepts, the selection of artists and works, or writing managerial texts from organizing and producing exhibitions (Parshikov, Yaichnikova, Maslyayev, Svetlyakov). Critics consider that “artistic” texts are different from those written for a sum of money (Kravtsova, Dyakonov).

The emphasis on the boundary between art and labor is indicative of the fact that art workers consider their practices to be based on independent, intellectual, educational and research-oriented interests, as well as driven by self-realization and “naked enthusiasm” (Tavasiev, Chehonadskih, Svetlyakov, Dyakonov, Mahacheva, Zhilyaev). For them, art is not a utilitarian activity or a monetary value and should be protected from subsumption into commercial exchange on market.

However, it is important that art workers themselves meaningfully blur the line between art and labor. If the state and employers/clients do this, and neither recognize art workers’ labor, nor guarantee that they will be adequately remunerated, it means that art workers are exploited under neo-liberal conditions (Oleynikov, Zhilyaev, Chehonadskih). If art workers demand the acknowledgement of their creative activity as labor, then they are able to fight against exploitation and to uphold the right to work and be fairly compensated. (Chehonadskih, Oleynikov).

2.5. Social Benefits

Within the field of contemporary art in Russia, art workers are deprived of most social benefits, such as: seniority, vacation time, temporary disability benefits, and pension. This is due to unstable employment, lack of formal contracts, and “black” and “grey” salaries/honorariums. Neither the state nor private organizations are able to provide art workers with long-term social benefits.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that art workers are generally disinterested in social benefits. They have to constantly search for jobs and are frequently not remunerated for their labor; therefore, the question of social benefits takes a back seat or even becomes irrelevant. Moreover, art workers commonly do not know how to apply for social benefits, or by whom and when these guarantees will be provided for them.

According to the Russian legislation, there are two types of contracts: labor (employment agreement) and commercial contracts. The first one includes several social benefits: seniority, vacation time, temporary disability benefits, and pension. The second one includes only pension.

Any work related or contractual benefits (seniority, leave of absence, temporary disability benefits, pension) are either extraneous to art workers employed on a temporary basis, or unreliable, as agreements with employers are usually verbal. Consequently, long-term social benefits - in practice - seem impossible to ensue due to art workers' unstable employment. (suggestion - Actually, the social benefits of a labor contract are not considered as "social rights" by art workers who are usually employed on a temporary basis. In many cases officially guaranteed benefits are provided only according to negotiations with an employee.) Vacation time has lost its status as the right for leisure and the art worker has to petition the employer for the date and duration of his/her leave (Zaitseva). As for temporary disability benefits, art workers rarely enjoy these; instead, they have to go to private clinics if they do not have health insurance already (Tavasiev, Parshikov). But in general, art workers cannot afford to get sick at all, not only because illness threatens the realization of their projects, but also because they could potentially lose money for not finishing their works.

In the case of commercial contracts, art workers may only rely on pension payments when they reach retirement age (the amounts depend on the size of remunerations and taxes). Still, for art workers pensions do not represent a guarantee and they are mostly associated with the deterioration of living conditions and fear of poverty. Art workers imagine they will not receive pension from the state once they reach retirement age, or if they do, the pension will be so miserable as to make it impossible to live on. Some elderly members of art workers' families are also facing these challenges (Tavasiev, Yaichnikova).

Therefore, the "work - remuneration - tax - pension" logic is not applicable for art workers. Deprived of social benefits, art workers hold mostly pessimistic views of their future: 1) to continue working after retirement age (Oleynikov, Mustafin); 2) dying before reaching retirement; 3) relying on financial support from their children; or 4) moving to a place where living costs are minimal (Mustafin).

3. Conclusion

Since the first interviews (25 April 2010) and until now (30 September 2012), art workers' labor conditions have not improved much. Therefore, it is important to reiterate some general demands made by art workers' in the interviews that were addressed to the general public, as well as to institutions for contemporary art. These demands aim to normalize and formalize working relations between employers/clients and art workers through contracts, which should include mandatory remuneration (advance, payment of their labor and its results) and provide social benefits. This should be an extension of a system of open competitions (grants, residences, prizes). The fulfillment of these basic demands creates opportunities for the implementation of non-commercial, critical projects in contemporary art (Chehonadskih, Zhilyaev, Oleynikov, Kravtsova, Dyakonov, Mahacheva, Auerbach, Yaichnikova, Mustafin, Parshikov).

1 Edited and translated from an original text by Evgenia Abramova published on polit.ru: <http://polit.ru/article/2012/09/30/altvorrabotnyki/>

2 See Bikbov Alexander. The economics and politics of critical judgment / Neprikosnovennyj Zapas (The Emergency Rations). No5(67). 2009. Steiner Arseny. Young artists / ArtChronika. 01.07.2010. Chehonadskih Maria. Lost in Translation: the precarity in theory and in practice / Hudozhestvenny Journal (The Moscow Art Journal). No79/80. 2010.

3 In Russia, there was no sociological research (either qualitative or quantitative) conducted on the labor conditions of art workers. This is perhaps due to the small size of the market for contemporary art. In addition, contemporary art is not a priority in state cultural policy (See Vladimir Putin, The construction of justice. Social policy for Russia. / putin2012.ru. 13.02.2012). Because of the rising popularity of “cultural industries” and the development of these industries, there will probably be more sociological researches in this area in the future.

4 The list of art workers who were interviewed within this project (in chronological order): Nikolay Oleynikov, artist; Rostan Tavasiev, artist; Maria Chehonadskih, art critic, curator; Sasha Auerbah, artist; Kirill Svetlyakov, art critic, curator; Arseniy Zhilyaev, artist, curator; Valentin Dyakonov, art critic; Ilya Wolf, Chief Operating Officer of art gallery; Maria Kravtsova, art critic; Anna Zaitseva, curator; Taus Mahacheva, artist; Denis Mustafin, artist; Andrey Parshikov, curator, art critic; Alexey Maslyaev, curator; Elena Yaichnikova, curator, art critic.

5 The Legislation on Culture No36 12-1 stipulates that “art workers” are those who create or interpret cultural values according to their own creative activities, as an integral part of their lives; art workers should be recognized as such regardless of whether or not they work under official agreements or they are part of a larger professional association. In addition, national law provides that art workers are also those adhering to the World Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention for the protection of literary and artistic works, and the Rome Convention for the protection of artists, including performers, phonogram producers and broadcasters.

6 In terms of publishing the interviews, the interviewees had editing rights to the final text. The reason why some information was elided or added was not specifically discussed. In only one case, we did not publish the name of an institution so as not to arouse the attention of the authorities.

7 Art workers’ names were added in brackets at the end of topics/paragraphs, which were discussed or mentioned in interviews with those particular art workers.

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